

Tiberias at Sunrise

This travel journal leads us on a journey to a location related to the Bible.
Formations Travel Journal by Jim Pitts



the Sea of Galilee

Prominent in the geography of the Gospels is the Sea of Galilee. Located in northern Israel and almost completely surrounded by mountains, it is cradled in a geological rift that starts in Lebanon and ends in Africa. The Sea of Galilee is actually a lake 14 miles long, 7 miles wide, 150 feet deep, and with a shoreline 32 miles in circumference. It is located 30 miles east of the Mediterranean, and its surface is 700 feet below sea level.

This body of water has been known by many names. In Matthew and Mark, it is called the Sea of Galilee, but John calls it the Sea of Tiberias and Luke knows it as the Lake of Gennesaret.

An even earlier name was Chinnereth, referencing an ancient town mentioned in the book of

Joshua. Chinnereth (or Kinneret) is probably derived from *kinnor*, the Hebrew word for harp, because the sea is shaped like a harp. Others imagine the shape of the Sea of Galilee forming a great heart.



Water flows into the Sea of Galilee from snowy Mount Hermon and from Lake Huleh in the north. Water exits the Sea of Galilee through the Jordan River, flowing 60 miles south to the Dead Sea. Below the Dead Sea, this rift valley becomes Wadi Arabah and then the Gulf of Aqaba and the Red Sea. This great rift runs parallel to the Israeli-Jordanian border.

In a dry and thirsty land, the Sea of Galilee has become a water reservoir today. Only a small section of the Jordan River, near the Sea of Galilee, can be used for baptisms. Huge amounts of river water



Sea of Galilee

Boat landing near Capernaum

have been siphoned off to meet needs in this arid region, and wastewater is pumped back in. The 60-mile downstream stretch of the Jordan River, a meandering stream from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea, is polluted with raw sewage.

Much of Jesus' ministry occurred around and even on this freshwater lake, especially along its northern shore. Since biblical times, fishing has thrived in these waters. Commercial fishermen use nets to catch fish in the Sea of Galilee just as they did in Jesus' day. Fishing in the Sea of Galilee provided a rich resource for Jesus' parables. He once declared, "The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea" (Matt 13:47-48).

Historically, Galilee was a crossroads of commerce and culture, a frontier intersection of customs and taxation. Here people passed through in caravans on the trade routes between Asia, Africa, and Europe. Also, people seeking cures for physical ailments made their way to the mineral springs of Galilee.

Numerous communities with biblical connections surrounded the lake:

- *Bethsaida*, a small fishing village near the northeastern shore, was the home of Peter, Andrew, and Philip. Jesus withdrew here upon learning of the death of John the Baptist.



Sea of Galilee

This view is from St. Peter and the Chapel of the Primacy on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee near Mount of Beatitudes, Tabgha and Capernaum.

- *Capernaum* became Jesus' adopted hometown. From this small village of fishermen, Jesus started his travels and returned. Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida formed "the evangelical triangle." In this lakeshore countryside, Jesus performed "mighty works" and laid the foundation of his ministry.

The inhabitants of Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida, in spite of being witnesses to many miracles, were reproached by Jesus for their lack of faith and failure to repent. Yet, his teaching and healing attracted crowds of fishermen, artisans, and farmers.

- *Tiberias* was built by Herod Antipas early in the first century AD and was named in honor of the emperor Tiberius. The hot mineral springs of Tiberias have been known for thousands of years for their healing qualities.



- *Magdala* was the home of Mary Magdalene, an early follower of Jesus.
- *Tabgha* is the traditional location of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (Mt 14:13-21). Its name, a corruption of Greek *Heptapegon*, is derived from the existence nearby of seven warm springs.

Sea of Galilee

Sea of Galilee (Hebrew Yam Kinneret) is a freshwater lake through which the Jordan River flows. The lake is harp-shaped, with a length from north to south of 14 miles, a maximum width of 7 miles. With a maximum depth of 157 feet, it covers about 64 square miles. The lake is 686 ft below the level of the Mediterranean Sea. Its

bed is part of the great Rift Valley. Approximately 40 miles south, the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea.



Capernaum - Greek Orthodox Interior

A depiction of Jesus and his disciples on the Sea of Galilee.



Sea of Galilee
Harbor at Ein Gev

The Sea of Galilee is widely associated with the ministry of Jesus. Along its shores, Jesus began to preach the kingdom of God, spent most of his public life, gave most of his teachings, and performed many miracles. It was here that the man of Galilee healed lepers, spoke to multitudes, stilled storms, and called and commissioned his disciples.

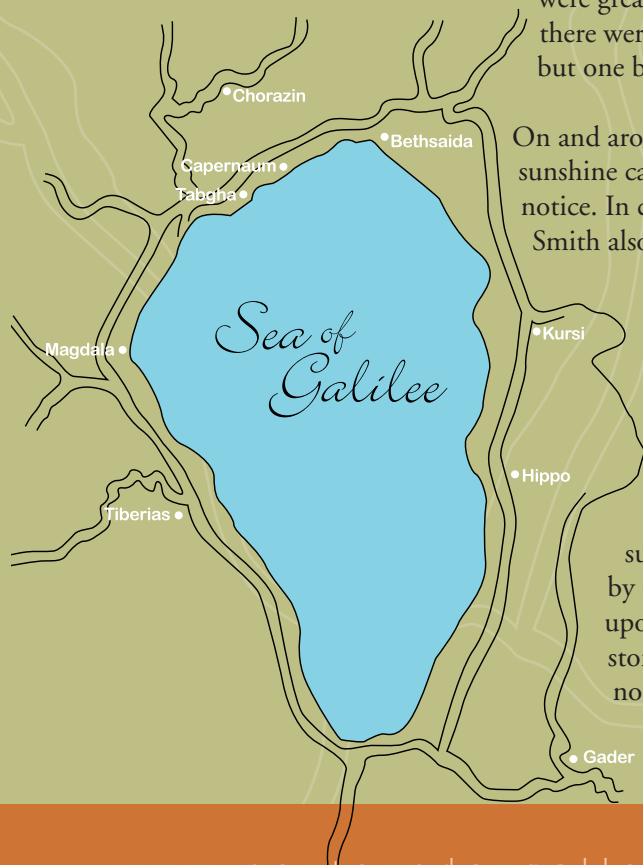
George Adam Smith, a nineteenth-century biblical geographer, describes the Sea of Galilee:

Sweet water, full of fish, a surface of sparkling blue. The lake of Galilee is at once food, drink, and air, a rest to the eye, coolness to the heat, an escape from the



Capernaum

In the first century, Capernaum was a fishing village on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. The scripture identifies Capernaum with the early accounts of Jesus teaching both Jews in the synagogue and Romans in the homes. Here Jesus called four fishermen (Peter, Andrew, James and John) and a tax collector (Matthew) as disciples.



crowd. Where there are now no trees, there were great woods, where there are marshes, there were noble gardens, where there is but one boat, there were fleets of sails.

On and around the Sea of Galilee, serene sunshine can become a raging storm with little notice. In contrast to his romantic reflections, Smith also writes,

We do not realize that the greater part of our Lord's ministry was accomplished at what may be truly called the bottom of a trench, 680 feet below sea level.... The cold currents, as they pass from the west, are sucked down in vortices of air, or by the narrow gorges that break upon the Lake. Hence sudden storms arise (for) which the region is notorious. ■

(Historical Geography of the Holy Land, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1894)

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